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Cassidy: Mouse Squad kids repair computers and build life skills

By Mike Cassidy
Mercury News Columnist
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So I'm at the punch bowl during one of those end-of-the-school-year events that roll around with stunning frequency this time of year when I see this guy headed straight for me with that unmistakable obsessive networker look in his eye.

And sure enough, he's reaching for a business card as he launches into his elevator pitch about how he took his enterprise from almost nothing to a robust organization, about how his work has changed his life while improving the lives of others, etc.

Did I mention the guy was a freshman? In high school? Meet Michael Wraa, president of the Aragon High School Mouse Squad club. (You might as well meet him. He's sure to introduce himself to you soon enough.) He was at the Tech Museum in San Jose to join those celebrating another year of Mouse Squad of California, a nonprofit that helps schools teach kids how computers and software work and prepare them to provide campus tech support. (Sorry, no house calls. They help only at their schools.)

"It's given me an opportunity to repair technology," Wraa tells me. "It's given me leadership opportunities."

And business opportunities. Turns out Wraa has taken some of his Mouse Squad skills and started his own Web design/photography/computer engineering business. (Beats mowing lawns.) The club has helped him make friends, he says, and better understand the point of learning about math, science and technology.

The kid got my attention. I'd been thinking

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The Mouse Squad kids Monique Nguyen,11, on left, Vicky Quach,11,center, and... (Josie Lepe)

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lately about the technology gaps in California schools. Mouse Squad (as in computer mouse) endeavors to help fill one: the need for people to keep school computers and other technology running. Like almost everything about technology in schools, the program is a patchwork. Jan Half, Mouse Squad's program director, says the California initiative has grown from five schools six years ago to 80 statewide now. About 30 of those are in Silicon Valley, each typically paying a fee of $1,500 for the program. In return, the schools get training for teachers, who serve as advisers, and a comprehensive curriculum that teaches kids everything from how to take a computer apart to how to understand a user's frantic complaint.

Some schools offer Mouse Squad as an elective. Others make it an after-school club. Many deputize the members as tech support workers, who respond to emergency breakdowns, freezes, crashes, operator errors and general befuddlement.

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"It's been a real service to us," Carla Haakma, principal at Los Arboles Elementary School in San Jose, tells me a few days after the Tech bash. "They go through 20 lessons and learn about troubleshooting, defragging a computer. They also learn to take apart a hard drive, add memory."

With school budgets stretched thin, it's wonderful what these kids can do for computers. But that's not the best thing.

"I think the best thing about the Mouse Squad is what it's done for the kids themselves," says Haakma, who oversees

a school where nearly all the kids receive free or subsidized lunches. "It's built a lot of confidence. It really does a lot for their self-esteem."

Haakma walks me over to the school library, where the 20-member Mouse Squad is holding its weekly after-school session. In a time when educators and employers are racking their brains for ways to encourage students to gravitate toward tech, this might be one: Get them involved early in technology work that actually makes a difference.

"It's fun," says Gurteg Singh, a fifth-grader and Mouse Squad veteran. "We also get to fix all the teachers' problems."

And the kids in the library begin recounting just what problems: They helped Mrs. Smith with her new interactive electronic white board; slew Ms. Morse's high-tech white board problems, too. Fifth-grader Daniel Ochoa reveled in the joy of replacing a computer's cooling fan that very day: "It was pretty fascinating." Monique Nguyen, another fifth-grader, says she took her skills home to revive her parents' computer.

It's hard to beat helping someone who needs it, the kids say.

"It always makes me feel good," says Byran Adams, a fourth-grader, "because I've accomplished a mission."

Yeah, it's a good feeling. And a great lesson that goes well beyond technology.

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